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ABSTRACT

This paper is about teaching writing for academic purposes to non-native speakers of English at English-medium universities in such differing contexts as Japan and Spain. It provides an analysis of the role of nominal groups in academic registers, along with data from Japanese and Spanish student essays written for English language courses at the university level. The data indicate little approximation towards the register of academic writing with regard to the nominal group, even after their writing courses, where the learners are exposed to academic writing across the curriculum through assigned readings. It is asserted that this warrants more inclusion of classroom activities, which highlights the role of nominal groups in academic writing. (Contains 14 references.) (KFT)

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Nominalized Writing: Approximating Academic Register

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> ...as far as education is concerned...students need to learn to read abstract discourse if they are to be functionally literate in our culture and write abstract discourse if they are to interpret their world in a critical way. ... the effect of abstraction in the grammar of a text is to...foreground nominal groups at the expense of clause complexes." (Martin, 1993: 218-219)

Abstract

This paper provides an analysis of the role of nominal groups in academic registers, along with data from Japanese and Spanish student essays written for English language courses at the university level. The data indicate little approximation towards the register of academic writing with regards the nominal group, even after their writing courses, where the learners are exposed to academic writing across the curriculum through assigned readings. We feel that this warrants more inclusion of classroom activities which highlight the role of nominal groups in academic writing.

Introduction

Teaching writing for academic purposes to non-native speakers of English in such differing contexts as Spain and Japan presents some very similar challenges. We have found direct parallels with respect to two main challenges in our teaching situations at English-medium universities located in Madrid and Tokyo. The first challenge is that the learners come to our classrooms out of educational contexts where language teaching is focused on grammatical accuracy. The second challenge is that, with regard to fluency, the learners place great value on command of the spoken language. These two perceptions of what language is result in texts produced by our learners in the

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writing classroom which either show a focus on getting the grammar right, or which sound too "spoken".

Both of us were frustrated at the difficulty we felt when tackling these challenges through the focus in "college composition" on having students explore their beliefs and assumptions through writing argumentative essays, using a process approach of pre-writing tasks and activities, multiple drafts, peer revision, and teacher feedback. While we welcome the exploration that approach allows of the writing process, we felt it did not provide enough exploration of how written language, especially that of the academy, differs from spoken language.

We feel that we have found a response to this through Systemic Functional Linguistics, a paradigm which adds to the teaching of academic writing, as it helps raise students' awareness of the context of situation in which and for which a given text is produced, and the connection between that context and the linguistic resources of the text itself. Indeed, these past years have witnessed a growing interest in the application of SFL theory and research findings to the teaching of writing at the undergraduate level. For example, Schleppegrell (2000) shows "How SFL can inform writing instruction", focusing on the utility of SFL in helping students understand the relationship between linguistic choices and the genres and registers for which they are required to write during their academic careers. She highlights vocabulary choice and the reciprocal relationship that has with transitivity structures, interpersonal choices and perceived impersonality, clause-combining resources, and, again, Theme selection. Alonso Belmonte and McCabe (1998) also look at Theme selection and thematic patterning as tools for evaluation of L2 writers' texts and for draft revision at the undergraduate level. Jones, Gollin, Drury and Economou (1989) provide several ways

of helping L2 learners develop their awareness of the characteristics of target academic genres and registers based on SFL.

One key contribution of SFL to literacy development worldwide has been that of sketching out the differences between written and spoken registers (e.g. Halliday, 1985)[1]. We turn to that now, in order to highlight the significance of the main focus of this study, the nominal group, in the creation of academic register.

Written vs. Spoken Register

Table 1 provides a summary of the main differences between written and spoken texts:

TABLE 1
Cline of Register

Most Spoken <----------	----------> **Most Written**
Grammatically Intricate	Lexically Dense
Interpersonal	Ideational
Concrete	Abstract
Meaning as process	Meaning as product
Verbal	**Nominal**
Informal	Formal
Implicit	Explicit
Congruent	Metaphoric
Iconic	Symbolic

adapted from Helen Leckie-Tarry, 1995: 64

First of all, it is important to point out that the above represents a cline. There are spoken discourses which are quite formal, and which, perhaps, have been written to be read, such as a speech or a sermon. There are also written discourses which are quite informal, such as e-mail, or messages written back and forth between friends in the school room. What we describe here are the ends of the cline, that is, language which is *most spoken*, such as a conversation between two friends at one end, with language which is *most written*, for example a formal essay or a textbook, at the other end.

On the ends of the cline, then, spoken language is more grammatically intricate than written language; that is, the clause structures are much more complex. Written

language, on the other hand, is more lexically dense: more information is packed into the clause, which is grammatically simpler than in spoken language. Secondly, the spoken language centers on the interpersonal relationships between speakers, while written language centers on the informational import, or, in Halliday's (1994) terms, the *ideational*. The purpose of a conversation is often to establish and maintain social ties, while often the purpose of a written text is to provide information to its readers, who may be multiple, thus obscuring the interpersonal relationships between the interlocutors.

Spoken language is often rooted in the concrete, in what surrounds us, while the written language is often highly abstract in its reference to concepts which can often only be expressed through a series of logical connections across several ideas. Also, in spoken language, meaning is in constant flux; it is a constant process, whereas in written language, once meaning has been written down and frozen by print, it can be evaluated as a product.

In spoken language, meanings are often expressed through the verb group of a clause; one reason for this may be that we often converse about we're doing or have done or will be doing (again showing the grammatical intricacies of the tenses used). Written language, particularly at its most formal end, will be heavily nominal, that is a great deal of information will be packed into the nominal groups of the clause, and often these nominal groups will be linked together through small copular verbs.

Spoken language is often highly informal, meanings are often implicit, shared and easily understood, and they also tend to be congruent and iconic. That is, in the spoken language, processes are realized by verbs, participants by actors, and connections are made through conjunction. Written language, on the other hand, tends to be formal,

meanings need to be explicit due to the distance between the interlocutors, and they also tend to be metaphoric and symbolic. Thus in written language, processes are often encoded in the nominal group, participants are often inanimate, abstract entities, and connections happen in the verb. This is illustrated by the following examples

> **More spoken text:** *Here's my essay...er.. I'm submitting it late because I...umm..er I got sick and my car broke down last week and ..umm..I..er..couldn't get over here..with..without it...*
>
> **More written text:** Illness and transportation problems last week caused the late submission of my essay.

In the spoken text, we see processes expressed through the verbs: *submitting, got sick, broke down, get over here*. There is a human actor as participant, *I*, and connections are realized through conjunctives: *because, and*. The written text however, contains processes in the nominal groups (*submitting* becomes *submission, got sick* becomes *illness, broke down* becomes *transportation problems*). Furthermore, non-concrete, inanimate entities become the participants of the clause: for example, *illness* and *transportation problems* are non-congruent actors of verbal processes. Logical connections are realized through the verb *caused*. We can also see here that the spoken text is more grammatically intricate in its complex use of hypotactic and paratactic clauses, and that the written text is a simple SVO clause, yet it densely packs the meaning into complex nominal groups. It is this feature that we focus on here.

The Nominal Group

It is important to point out here that the process of nominalization has been much disparaged, often thought of as *bureaucratic-speak*, used to obscure intended meanings. However, if we analyze more formal written texts, it is clear that the nominal group has an important role to play in construing meanings. In fact, it plays a key role in academic

written registers. Jones (1990), states: "Much of the complexity in writing is built up in the nominal group which may have a complex structure of Head noun, Pre-Modifier and Post-Modifier consisting of embedded clauses and phrases which may contain further nominal groups." Leckie-Tarry (1995) also indicates the important role nominal constructions play in creating abstract texts with a low degree of iconicity, or congruence, the features more typically found in spoken text. Instead, academic written texts utilize a high degree of symbolism or grammatical metaphor. Halliday (cf. 1996) has stressed the importance of this distinction because of its impact on literacy.

The nominal group, thus, consists of at least a head noun, and any accompanying modifiers. Thus, the following example

these two large Tiger sharks with ravenous intent

consists of the head noun *sharks*, along with modifiers which can be mapped more delicately as can be seen in Table 2:

TABLE 2
Mapping of Nominal Group

these	*two*	*large*	*Tiger*	*sharks*	*with ravenous intent*
Deictic	**Numeral**	**Epithet**	**Classifier**	**Head Noun**	**Qualifier**
	Pre-modifiers			**Head Noun**	**Postmodifier**

However, for our purposes here, we will not analyze the nominal groups in the data more delicately in terms of the functions of the modifiers into Deictic, Numeral, etc.; instead, we will stay at the more general level of Head Noun and Pre- and Post-modifers. The next section lays out the methodology we used in our analysis.

Methodology

Our study involved two sets of texts. The first is a collection of texts used in the L2 writing classroom, which we label *source texts*, culled from different disciplinary areas,

each of which consists of about a paragraph in length, or approximately 150 words. The second set can actually be divided in two, as it involves a collected sample of student essays from our workplaces in Japan and Spain. We collected samples from 5 students over the course of a year (in the case of the Japanese students) or a semester (in the case of the Spanish students). There were several collection points over the course of the terms; however, for purposes of this study we chose to analyze only their initial and final essays. Finally, to narrow down the analyzed texts, we chose 3 students initial and final essays from initial 5 at random.

We then analyzed the texts into clauses, and then tagged all of the instances of nominal groups. These we divided into four categories: *Head* (a nominal group consisting of just the Head noun) *Head + 1* (a head noun plus one modifier), *Head + 2* (head noun plus 2 modifiers) and *Complex* (head noun plus 3 or more modifiers). We originally had thought of another category, *Nominalization*, (exemplified by *late submission of my assignment* above). However, there were not enough of these in the student data to warrant a separate category.

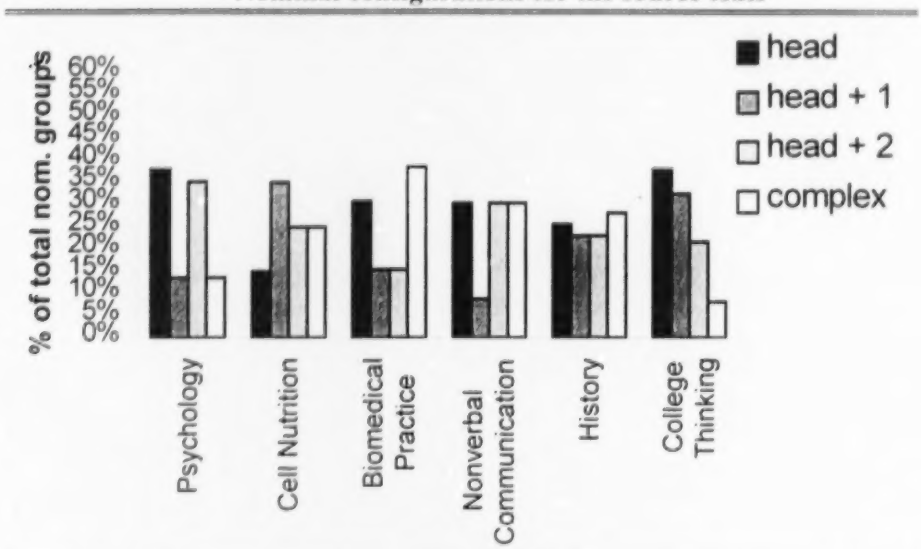
For each set of texts, the total number of nominal groups was calculated, and then based on that total number, percentages for each of the categories were determined. Thus, in part, the methodology of this study is quantitative, in that things are counted. However, it is not a statistical analysis; the quantitative data is used as a basis for interpretation, to link the textual elements (in this case, the nominal group) with the context and situation of the text. We now turn to the results for the source texts and the student texts.

Results

Nominal Group Results: Source Texts

We present first the results from the source texts in graph form, in order to convey visually the nominal group configuration for each of the texts. In each of the graphs represented in Figure 1, the vertical axis represents the percentages out of the total number of nominal groups of each of the categories, which appear on the horizontal axis.

FIGURE 1
Nominal configurations for the source texts



Some similarities can be seen across these configurations. For instance, in Biomedical Practice (BP), Nonverbal Communication (NC) and History (H), the bars show a similar pattern, starting somewhat high in Head, dipping for Head + 1 and Head + 2, and ending high again with Complex. With the BP text, Complex is the highest of the 3 categories, with Head following 8 percentage points behind, and with smaller but equal amounts of nominal groups classified as Head + 1 and Head + 2. The NC text as equal amounts of Head, Head + 2, and Complex nominal groups, and dips way down in

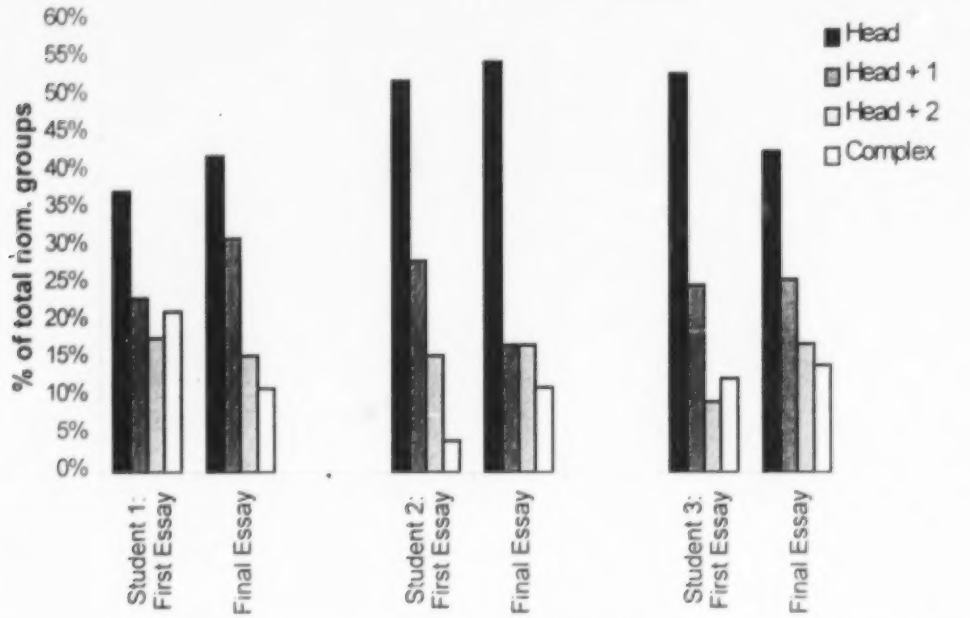
the Head + 1 category. H shows an interesting configuration, starting with 26% of its nominal groups consisting of Head, dipping very slightly for Head + 1 and Head + 2, and surpassing Head with Complex by 2 percent. Cell Nutrition (CN) shows a different configuration in that it does not show the curve of the previous three. Instead, it starts very low in the Head category, with only 15% of its nominal groups, and moves up to 35% for Head + 1, and then dipping down to 25% for both Head + 2 and Complex.

While there are differences in the configurations across the different fields, they all show a fairly high use of Complex as compared to the College Thinking text. This text shows a downward configuration, starting high with Head at 38%, moving down slightly for Head + 1, and then more sharply for Head + 2, ending with a sharp drop for Complex, down to 8%.

Nominal Group Results: Student Texts

Interestingly, this last text is that which most resembles the student texts. In looking at the Spanish students' configurations, we see the same tendency towards the downward curve, starting high at Head, and ending low at Complex. This is the case for the most part for both the first essays and for the final essays, showing very little progress in terms of incorporating more complex nominal groups in their writing throughout the semester, as can be seen in Figure 2:

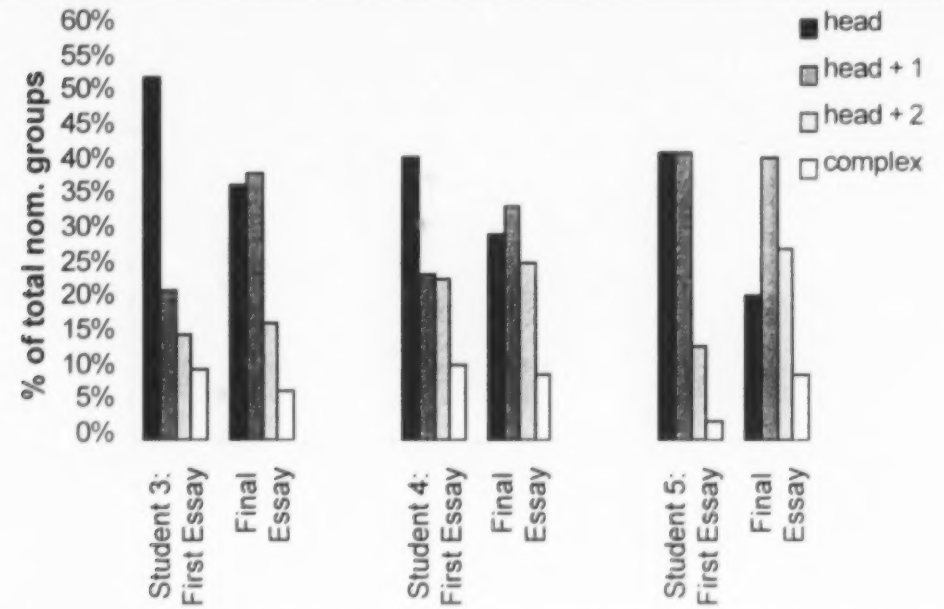
FIGURE 2
Nominal group results: Spanish students



Student 1 actually shows a more promising configuration in his first essay; than in his final one; while he does drop down in reliance on the Head category in his final essay, and demonstrates an increase in Head + 1, he shows a considerable decrease in Head + 2 and Complex. Students 2 and 3 do show slightly more promising configurations in terms of incorporation of more complexity in their nominal groups. Student 2 shows a slight increase in Head + 2 (3%) and a larger one (7%) in Complex; however, he does this at the expense of Head + 1, and he remains high on his final essay in Head. Student 3's configuration is the most optimal in terms of approximation to the source texts in that he drops 10% in Head, remains the same in Head + 1, and rises 5% and 4% respectively in Head + 2 and Complex.

We now turn to the results from the Japanese students:

FIGURE 3
Nominal group results: Japanese students



Student 4's configuration is the most similar of the Japanese students' texts to those of the Spanish. There is a movement downward in terms of relying mainly on Head, as she shifts to a greater use of Head + 1. However, Head + 2 and Complex remain equally low. Student 5's configuration (Chart 12) shows a similar one to that of Student 4, with the difference that she began with higher counts of Head + 2 and Complex, which she maintains while also decreasing reliance on Head, and increasing that of Head + 1. Student 6 also shows a downward shift in her reliance on Head, stays equal on Head + 1, and increases her use of both Head + 1 and Complex.

Discussion

There are some clear differences between the texts the students produce and the texts that they read in their writing classrooms. The student writers rely very heavily on nominal groups consisting solely of Head noun, while, in the case of the source texts, Head is also the most popular, yet then the graph configuration remains fairly similar

for all categories. The student texts, on the other hand, show a fairly steep downward drop, with low instances of the more complex categories of Head + 2 and Complex. For the Spanish students, this remains very much the case at the end of their writing courses, with little movement in terms of addition of more complex categories of nominal groups. The Japanese writers show more of a movement towards greater complexity in their nominal groups. One of the reasons for the difference could be the length of the course: in the case of the Spanish students, the writing course lasted a semester, while the Japanese students' course lasted a full academic year. Also, the two groups differ in the purpose of the writing programs they are involved in. The Japanese students are involved in writing and rewriting papers, and on incorporating some outside sources in their texts[2] The Spanish students are preparing to write the TWE (Test of Written English), a timed prompt exam which calls for an expression of the writer's personal opinion on a topic; Shaw and Liu (1998) suggest that this kind of task does not call for complex and concise writing. Thus, this difference in results across the two mini-corpora of student texts leads us to the question of whether the TWE washback allows for the most optimal preparation for academic writing, a question which goes beyond the aims of this study at present.

Conclusions

The nominal group is clearly a widely-used resource in writing in the creation of academic register. Nonetheless, student writers do not exploit this resource in their own writing. One reason for this might be the focus in the language classroom on grammatical accuracy, especially in terms of the verb group, in the focus on getting the tenses right, and on using a variety of verbs for expression. However, often the

focuses of the language classroom do not always take into account the reasons for which learners need to communicate using the target language.

We feel that an instructional focus on nominal groups could help to achieve the goal of helping students to become functionally literate in the academic world. However, at the same time it would not be to the learners' benefit to simply provide them with activities in which they are presented with instances of nominal groups followed by focused practice. Learners also need to understand clearly the purposes of academic writing, and the role nominal groups fulfill in helping to create academic registers. Thus, what is needed is a genre-based pedagogy, one which allows for exploration of academic texts, focusing on the meanings created, in this case, through the nominal group. Contrasting the role of the nominal group in different genres would also help learners to understand more clearly how meaning is packaged differently in different registers and genres.

It is important to point out here that we do not expect our students to write like textbooks. However, the purpose of focused instruction on the nominal group also includes the needs they have of decoding more densely-packed texts in terms of the reading they have to do for their subject courses.

At the same time, we feel that further studies are needed in terms of the different genres in academic writing to have a clearer picture of the role of the nominal group. For example, a study such as this one using successful L1 and L2 essays and papers across the curriculum would give more insights into the kind of writing our students need to approximate. Once again, sharing the results of that kind of study with our learners can help them achieve their goal of academic success. As Halliday (1996) puts it:

"The value of having some explicit knowledge of the grammar of written language is that you can use this knowledge, not only to analyse the texts, but as a critical resource for asking questions about them."

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[1] In the Hallidayan model of Systemic Functional Grammar (Halliday, 1994), register theory refers to the linguistic choices made in given contexts of situation, i.e. in a particular situational context, people will make situational appropriate meanings through appropriate lexico-grammatical choices. The variables which determine the register of a given text are field (the subject matter at hand), mode (the channel of communication, e.g. written or spoken, or, more delicately, a textbook, a sermon, a conversation, etc.), and tenor (the relationship between interlocutors).

[2] While some quotes appeared in the Japanese students' data, the quotes were not analyzed for their nominal group configuration, and were left out of the analysis.

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